



A reflection on love and healing in this time of coronavirus

By Sue Richardson

'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'
(1 Corinthians 13:13, New International Version)

The impact of coronavirus on the international community has revealed, almost brutally, the reality of our global and national structures of economics, social relations, cultural expectations and political capacities. There are ongoing attempts to analyse this and, in many places, a commitment to learn from this experience to construct those structures anew.

The virus and its potential for death and for brokenness also calls on Christian Aid to revisit our fundamental beliefs and principles, so that we might act with vigour and timeliness in the work we undertake with our partners to remedy poverty and injustice.

What we see is that, although this virus 'does not discriminate', how it spreads and how it can be treated is rooted in discrimination and that, in turn, is rooted in poverty and vulnerability. People living in poverty everywhere have less capacity for the physical distancing that is demanded to keep all of us safe; they have fewer resources to buffer themselves against loss of income or to expend on stockpiling to see them through a period

of isolation. This is true in the UK. We are acutely aware of how much more severe these realities are in existing situations of global displacement, violence, humanitarian crisis and within the grinding demands of poverty.

We believe that all people are created in the image of God, and all carry innate dignity and worth. No one is dispensable and no one should be left behind in the global struggle with this pandemic. This means looking out for people who are most vulnerable, not merely through charity, but in clear policies of investment and resourcing.

'God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it.' (1 Corinthians 12:24-26)

Many of the religious images we use are inclusive ones: the body of Christ, the congregation, the worshipping community. Christian Aid's approach has always been to practise this inclusivity with partnerships, community projects and communal movements of struggle and resistance.

No part of the body is of any less importance than any other part. If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt. The danger for us in the global North is that we can become so focussed on dealing with our own health challenges that we forget to pay attention to those whose distress is compounded by the very brokenness of the system that this virus is exposing.

So what does love look like in these times?

What we see and hear is a strange inversion of our normal use of words. Those who were 'unskilled' have become 'key workers' keeping the rest of us safe and supplied. To be a good neighbour we are required to practise 'social distancing' which really challenges our understanding of those two words and how they can possibly relate to each other. Some have argued that we should talk about 'physical distancing' and seek to be socially related in every way we can, looking out for our immediate neighbours even if it means talking over the fence, phoning, writing, emailing and using the varied technologies at our fingertips that can bring people virtually into our lives.

Perhaps this is a good time to reflect that in many ways we have been practising social and physical distancing already across our globe. We are connected immediately by money and markets but, despite the pervasiveness of our media, we seem able to live with the huge disparities in access to the necessities of life experienced by our sisters and brothers across the world.

Can we learn from this current time to find it within ourselves to breach the fences that hide our global neighbours from us? Can the instances of community care we are seeing now reconfigure our understanding of who is my neighbour? Can the current public stance of support for those serving us on the frontline weather the temptation when this crisis is over to slip back into complacency? And can our new understanding of who is 'key' to our wellbeing be extended within the spiritual metaphor of the body, to include those we have previously kept at arm's length or out of sight?



This is what love looks like in these strange times: physically distant but socially connected. ¹

‘Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, “Do not even go into the village.”’

(Mark 8:22-26)

When Jesus heals people, there is more going on than the simple relief of physical symptoms. There is an underlying commentary on the social situation that has compounded the suffering: the marginalisation of the woman with the issue of blood; the suspicion and exclusion of the leper, the restriction of community participation and the resulting dependency on the charity of others for the blind.

Healing is also an emergence into a new way of living. Jesus says to the man with renewed vision: don't go back to the old life and the old ways.

As we discover what being healed from the effects of this virus can restore to us, we need to vow to walk on new paths. We need to leave the old village behind and explore a vision of a new world.

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¹ Graphic with thanks to the Warehouse Project, Cape Town, South Africa <https://warehouse.org.za> and Duke Global Health Institute <https://globalhealth.duke.edu>